The Yearning
November 27, 2011
First Sunday of Advent

John Buchanan, Pastor
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Psalm 80:1–7
Isaiah 64:1–9
Mark 13:32–37

“Stir up your might, and come save us.”
Psalm 80:2 (NRSV)

Emmanuel—God with us. . . . The claim is that it is something that has happened. Year after year the ancient tale of what happened is told—raw, preposterous, holy—and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen.

Frederick Buechner
Secrets in the Dark

Silence in us any voice but your own, O God, because there are a lot of voices clamoring at us. As we begin another Advent, give us moments of quiet in which we might hear you, might hear the singing of angels, might know, again, the miracle of your love come to be with us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Oh! You better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I’m telling you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.

To be a child in December is to know the most exquisite kind of waiting—impatient waiting, waiting in hope. Something big is about to happen, and when you look around it seems like it is already happening. But it isn’t here yet. It will be, but not yet.

To be a child in the weeks before Christmas is to experience existentially the great theological paradox of “already but not yet.” The kingdom of God is present, but it is also coming. The world has been redeemed, but it is not yet what it can and will be. Christ has come; Christ will come again.

In the meantime, Christmas is all around us. Here on Michigan Avenue, the pace begins to quicken around Halloween and accelerates through the early weeks of November. One night in mid-November the big tree is delivered to the Hancock Plaza, and the workers begin installing the lights on the trees all the way down the Avenue. Store windows brighten with new, colorful displays. There are sales and bargains, and the local economy goes into overdrive. Merchants depend on the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas for something like 90 percent of the year's profit.

The newspaper I read on Thanksgiving Day, the *Dallas Morning News,* observed that Friday used to be the day after Thanksgiving. Now it is Black Friday, "the most cutthroat day in retail sales." Macy's, Target, Best Buy opened at midnight, and the crush to get in was so intense that people were injured and several fights broke out and arrests were made. In a Walmart in Los Angeles a shopper panicked, pulled pepper spray from her purse, and let the crowd of shoppers around her have it. Black Friday has taken on a life of its own.

And in the middle of all that, just at that moment, the church slows down, puts on the brakes, becomes somber, pensive. It's Advent, an intentionally quiet time to spend pondering, watching, waiting for something to happen. It is the time of year the preacher has to field the perennial complaint: "Why do we have to sing those sad hymns in a minor key? Why can't we sing Christmas carols like everybody else?" The only answer to which is, We will, we will, but it isn't time yet. We have to get ready; we have to wait, be patient. It will happen, but it hasn't happened yet.

The truth is the music of Advent is particularly beautiful and meaningful. Musicians like it a lot, are committed to it, and so in many a Christian church, Advent is also the time when the organist, choir director, and minister go to war. The organist wants to play somber Bach Advent preludes; the people are telling the minister they're ready for a little joy and liveliness. The organist wants to sing hymns like the strong, somber "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand." People are ready for "Joy to the World" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," and the minister is conflicted about who, he ought to listen to: the people who pay his or her salary or the person he or she has to work with all year. So sometimes Advent can be a time of unhappy conflict. Not here, I hasten to say. For two reasons: One, I love Advent music, too. Some of my favorite hymns are the Advent hymns. But the most important reason why an unusual peace prevails at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago during Advent is that our organist and choir director is not only a superb musician but also a most reasonable man, and starting around the second Sunday of Advent he lets me slip a carol or two in the liturgy—so everybody is a little unhappy.

To observe Advent, to get anything out of Advent, to have a good Advent, is to wait, to have the experience of "already but not yet."

In fact, waiting is an important Biblical theme. It's more than passive waiting: It's yearning, actually.

> O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
> so that the mountains would quake at your presence,
> to make your name known to your adversaries.

That prayer is 2,500 years old. It's from the sixty-fourth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, and it comes around in the Lectionary every three years. And every time it does, I think of my friend Walter Bouman, a Lutheran theologian who taught at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and was a jolly, big bear of a man who died too soon but was full of life, energy, and laughter until the day he died. I'm grateful to Walter for many things, and high on the list is that he introduced me to his favorite book—not a heavy, scholarly tome, but a little volume: *Children's Letters to God.* Walt used to say that you can find every major theological question and every major theological issue somewhere in those letters:

> Dear God,
> Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?
> Lucy

> Dear God,
> Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
> Joyce

> Dear God,
> Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own room. It works with my brother.
> Larry

> Dear God,
> Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
> Jane

And Walter's favorite, an Advent prayer:

> Dear God,
> Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.
> Love,
> Harriet Anne

Walter said Harriet Anne sounds a lot like the prophet Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down to make your name
known to your adversaries.”

The situation is this: The armies of Babylon have crushed Israel and have carried off Israel’s leadership, politicians, businessmen, clergy, back to Babylon to live in exile. Several generations pass in exile, and then amazing things happen. The Persian Empire defeats the Babylonians, and one of the first things the Persian leader, Cyrus, does is send the Jewish exiles home, back across the desert to Jerusalem. They have been waiting for this moment for seventy years, for three generations. They have been singing songs about Jerusalem, reciting poems, telling stories to their children born in Babylon, stories about their beautiful city, the strong walls, the turrets, the gleaming buildings, the temple built by King Solomon himself. But when they arrive after the long trek across the desert, what they see is desolation. The walls have been knocked down, the beautiful buildings burned to the ground, and the temple—the heart and soul of the people—is in ruins. They should have known, but they didn’t. The original ones who told the stories and who had lived through the trauma of defeat and exile were all gone now. So the sight shocked those returning. It must have been like those heartbreaking pictures of families returning to their homes after a fire or a hurricane or a flood, sifting through the ashes for any scrap of their belongings, furniture, scrapbooks, photographs—any reminder of who they were and who they are.

It is at this moment that one of their poets prays for them: “O that you would open the heavens and come down.”

Psalm 80, which we read this morning, comes from the same time and expresses the same deep yearning: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel. . . . Stir up your might and come to save us!”

Or, “Are you real? Some people don’t believe it. If you are, you better do something quick.”

It is the oldest prayer in human history. It is a prayer prayed at every occasion of tragedy, every occasion of undeserved, innocent suffering. It is a prayer I suspect you and I pray a lot. “If you are a good and gracious and merciful God, why did this happen? Why does evil still haunt humankind in Darfur, Kosovo, Auschwitz? Why are bombs still killing children in Afghanistan? Why don’t you do something—tear open the heavens and come down?”

Nicholas Wolterstorff, Yale philosophy professor, a Christian, lost his twenty-five-year-old son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident and wrote,

“To the most agonized question I have ever asked, I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall” (*Lament for a Son*).

Terry Anderson, one of the American hostages held by Iran for seven years, wrote in his journal, “I reach so hard to touch God, concentrating, waiting for something, some acknowledgment from him that I exist, that he’s listening. . . . Help me. You say you love me, so help me.”

Who hasn’t prayed that prayer, asked that question? On one of the last days of summer, a teenager, Tristan Tyler Shambee, an athlete, good student, strong swimmer, drowned in Lake Michigan off the Wilmette beach. His father, Charles Shambee, told the *Tribune,* “They say everything happens for a reason. I sure wish I understood why this had to happen.”

We yearn for answers. We yearn for certainty. We yearn to know God is there. That God knows we are here. We yearn to know that God cares. And it is not just in the middle of tragedy and grief. It is an everyday yearning that seems to be deep within everyone of us, part of who we are.

Sophy Burnham, successful author, essayist, and freelance writer says, “I was happy and yet there was something deeply missing. And it was a deep longing that couldn’t be satisfied. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking, ‘Is this all?’ And then thinking, ‘I have everything. I have a loving husband, a house, children, career. Why am I yearning for something else?’ I didn’t know what I was yearning for” (Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*).

She was, of course, yearning for the same thing Isaiah, the exiles, Charles Shambee, Terry Anderson, Harriet Anne, and you and I yearn for: for God. Yearning the same ancient yearning for God to do something, to tear open the heavens and come down.

And then Isaiah’s prayer takes a surprising turn, a change in tone, offers a new idea about God and how God comes to and works in the world, how God relates to human beings, to you and me. Did you hear it? After pleading with God to do something, after whining that God is hiding, after almost accusing God for not coming down to make things right, the prayer makes a startling affirmation, offers a new idea, a confession of faith:

> Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
> we are the clay, and you are our potter;
> we are the work of your hand.

That is an absolutely new and unique idea of God and how God works: Father, Potter. Not a powerful force that violently tears open heavens and comes down, intervenes forcefully in human affairs to bring down cruel

dictators and establish justice. Who doesn't wish for a God like that? Not God omnipotent power in the universe, but God as, of all things, a parent, an artist.

I know a little bit about being a parent, and I know that love works a lot better than coercion. I have seen, over and over, how my inclination to force behavioral outcomes doesn't work and how steady, gentle persuasion does. I know enough about parenting to know that there are limits, that you cannot, finally, protect your child from all risk, all danger, all harm, that the final act of love is not to hold tightly and coerce, but let go and promise to be there in love, come what may.

I am certainly not an artist, but I have watched a potter at work enough to know that it is not about force and coercion but gentle persuasion. As the shapeless lump of clay whirls on the wheel, the potter gently touches it with a finger and slowly a form emerges. I have often thought that what a potter is doing is drawing a form out of a lump of clay that is somehow already present in the clay, waiting to be summoned. I loved learning that Michelangelo said something like that about the huge blocks of marble on which he worked. He said he wasn't creating a form so much as releasing a form that was already present in the marble.

That, remarkably, the ancient prophet said, is exactly who God is and how God works in the world and in individual lives: not coercively, but gently; not forcefully, but lovingly.

And so God will act, we believe, will come down, not by an act of violent tearing apart, but in the gentlest, quietest way—in the birth of a child. God will come, we believe, not a military conqueror, destroying enemies and putting things right, but in a gentle, but strong young man, a man who will teach the most astonishing things: that it is better to forgive than exact revenge; that it is better, happier in fact, to give than to get; that it is a far better thing to love than to hate. He taught and lived the most astonishing and new and radical ideas: that the peacemakers are blessed, that the meek and merciful are God's most favored ones, and finally that the best, happiest thing any one of us can do is give our lives away for his sake. And the greatest reversal of all: that real strength, real power, is not in muscular militarism but, of all things, vulnerable love that will suffer; that real power is in weakness. And then he will, himself, do the most amazing thing: he will go to the cross, to seal it, to make the point and to save your soul and mine.

Nobody ever had reason to think more intensely or poignantly about it than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi jail cell, waiting for his execution, wondering, I am sure, how a good and gracious God could allow this; why a loving God didn't or couldn't do something. He wrote, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the

world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 360).

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .

Dear God, you better do something quick . . .

God has. In the event we anticipate in these Advent days of waiting, we watch for a birth of a child in Bethlehem, a newborn who is God among us, Word made flesh, the very love of God in a life lived in the world, love that will experience everything it means to be human, in that birth and that life. And here's the thing: a love that will come into your life and mine in quiet, inconspicuous ways, ways you could miss if you are not waiting and watching; ways that are redemptive and new and hopeful and strong. It is a holy love that will suffer and die our death and rise again to show us and anyone who will see and listen that the love of God is the most powerful force in the world, a love from which nothing will ever separate us, a love that is God's response to our deepest yearning: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. All praise to him.

Amen.